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ABSTRACT

A discussion is presented on the commercialization of college team sports. The term "corporate athleticism" is used to refer to the influence of the business ethic on the college sport system, and the introduction of commercial values as the basic organizing principle of competitive college sports. Consideration is given to the consequences of corporate athleticism: (1) the emphasis on commercial gain may end amateurism in intercollegiate athletics; (2) external influences (especially market forces) on intercollegiate sports will increase; and (3) the role of profit-oriented team "boosters" will become increasingly important. The decreasing authority of the National Collegiate Athletic Association is discussed as well as the role of television in college sports. It is pointed out that television continues to structure corporate athleticism and creates new necessities to which universities, players and teams will adapt. Athletic directors make strong efforts to gain access to administrative resources needed to strengthen the athletic structure, and universities will go to great lengths to gain access to regional television markets. Some proposals are made for reforming corporate athleticism. (JD)

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CORPORATE ATHLETICISM: A NEW SPORTS PARADIGM

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On June 27, 1984, the U.S. Supreme Court decided, in a major antitrust suit brought by the Universities of Oklahoma and Georgia, that the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) could no longer act as the sole distributor of college football games to national television networks. In effect, this decision made each college or university a seller in a newly deregulated sports television market, and instigated a helter skelter scramble to gain access to the largest prime-time sports audiences. It is far too early to say with any certainty exactly what will emerge when the dust finally settles. It is not too early, however, to offer a few thoughts on the emergence of what appears to be a new sports system in the United States, a system whose structures are becoming increasingly clear with every passing season.

I have chosen to call this system corporate athleticism. The term as used it here refers to the influence of the business ethic on the new sports system.

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Above all, it connotes the introduction of commercial values as the basic organizing principle of competitive college sports.

Corporate athleticism places winning above all else, as the number one priority. It expends great effort (investment) to recruit, train, and develop top athletes (workers) and to find and reward "winning" coaches (management). Winning football (the product) will then generate, if all goes well, substantial gate receipts and numerous television contracts (profit).

1. The separation of the stadium from the campus at many universities;
2. the appearance of the student athlete before massive national television audiences; and
3. the systematizing of national recruiting efforts at prominent public universities all constitute key ingredients of corporate athleticism.

The athletic complex is both directly linked to expanding market forces, (that is, television and mass-appeal sports) and also more removed than other administrative units from academic values which permeate other sectors of the university. Individuals recruited into the corporate athletic complex are

recruited not as students but primarily as potentially successful players of quasi-professional intercollegiate athletic roles. In various ways through, for example, the distortion of academic recruitment criteria, the low graduation rates for prominent athletes, or the inflated grades given athletes--the university validates the athletes extra-academic status. In effect, the university's accommodation to the sports market is pervasive and self perpetuating. The trend towards corporate athleticism is not only reinforced and, often encouraged by the traditional processes of higher education.

On the historical evidence, the commercialization of college sports is not inherently incompatible with the maintenance of academic values. As sports commercialism in the universities has steadily expanded, overall academic standards at universities have in fact increased.(Kerr: 1982) Even as criticism has grown, universities have further legitimized sports commercialism by organizing special remedial activities to improve the low academic performance of numerous athletes.(Warfield: 1983) This is an adaptive measure however, and it, along with the historical record, merely illustrates the extent to which the athletic

complex at schools with major sports programs remains functionally separate from the university.[3] Though public criticism of sports commercialism persists, the continuous development of the new college sports system seems to be irreversible.

Consequences of Corporate Athleticism

Though structural tensions exist at many points in this evolving sports system, it nevertheless seems clear that exansionary competitive impulses are an important attribute of corporate athleticism. If this assertion is valid, it is important to determine how each institution works to sustain or accommodate the interests of corporate athleticism, and to probe existing trends in corporate athleticism.

1. End of Amateurism in Intercollegiate Athletics

More than ever, it seems clear that the reign of the amateur in intercollegiate athletics has ended. Most observer who have some degree of objectivity admit that the present system of intercollegiate sports is highly professionalized.(Raspberry, B-2t: 1983) Whereas the amateur participated in

intercollegiate athletics as a diversion from mental activity, the corporate athlete performs as a diversion for others. He(or she) performs before a mass audience with high expectations of reward and recognition. Clearly, the character of the contemporary sports regime with its emphasis on specialization and pecuniary gain indicates that the new sports system rests on values fundamentally different from those ideals associated with the aloof, high culture of amateurism.

Whereas, strictly speaking, an amateur in sports may be considered one who participates in his leisure without extensive training, and without financial, social or other significance attached to winning or losing, the corporate athlete participates in sports full-time, requiring intensive and extensive training, ultimately to secure financial renumeration and all the perquisites of a professional career. With the erosion of racial and sexual exclusion at many American universities since the 1960s, college sport now constitutes an open system for men and women of exceptional athletic talent. Corporate athleticism, above all, is characterized by competitive intensity and by an emphasis on winning at any cost.

2. Increased External Influence (especially Market Forces) on Intercollegiate Sports

Television plays and will continue to play the primary role as a structuring mechanism of corporate athleticism. It performs this pivotal role primarily as the creator, promoter, and organizer of financially lucrative sports markets. Television occupies a critical niche in corporate athleticism because it possesses the capacity to organize mass appeal for its products.

Through such means, television stimulates competition between universities interested in gaining maximum access to scarce television time. Rather than simply compete against one another, the superstar university athletic teams, in which a $200,000 salary for coaches is by no means unusual, compete for attendance, national or regional television time, and revenue. These benefits to a university are influenced substantially by a team's ability to obtain access to national televised markets. Television creates both the collegiate superstar and the superpowers. Access to the lucrative sports system associated with performance on television defines the corporate nature of the new sports system.

The fact that nearly all college sports teams strive to penetrate national television markets defines the boundaries of corporate athleticism. Those universities that do not penetrate television markets, will perforce remain amateurs.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to locate so-called amateurs in the college ranks these days. With the expansion of cable television systems universities which otherwise would have been locked out of having their games televised have found new opportunity for exposure and revenue. Even the Simon-pure Ivy league has been moved to seek sport respectability through regional telecasting of their games. Perhaps, corporate athleticism is as much an attitude as it is producing big-time sports powers.

Television then, dramatically raised the financial stakes associated with college sports. Since the sports market is finite, television contracts are offered to those teams, which, because they are consistent winners, can most easily attract a large television audience. Television production, in this only certain university sports contests can easily generate extensive markets. The diversification of various sports events on television indicates the growing

potential of this market. Indeed, it seems clear, the overall success of college sports in attracting audiences has increased the range of the sports market for tennis, golf, hockey, and soccer as producers seek to penetrate smaller television audiences. But competition between universities and among sports increases the segmentation in the sports market--a trend likely to persist in the 1980s.

The universities' newly won right to negotiate directly with television networks for appearances will extend the scope of corporate atheleticism.

1. For one thing, universities will deepen their orientation towards the commercial system.(Carnegie Foundation Report, 1983:86)
2. They will be free to bargain with television networks on the basis of their individual market positions.
3. They will, accordingly, possess greater incentives to establish and maintain a clearly defined market position.
4. Universities, therefore, seem likely to adapt even more to television markets as a result of winning the right to negotiate directly for appearan-

ces with national or regional television networks.

5. Consequently, the role of market forces in intercollegiate sports should grow larger as more universities will henceforth directly compete for market position as determined by successful television appearances.

At the same time, however, the deregulation of college sports will place universities in a more dependent position vis-a-vis television producers. Such producers, in turn, should become stronger inasmuch as they can select sports contests on the basis of audience appeal and the corresponding willingness of advertisers to pay more to sponsor such appearances.

But there is a cloud over this scenerio. For some major college programs anticipating a financial windfall from television, disappointment looms. While more games are being televised, the television audience has also become more fractured. This means, among other things, that there will be fewer advertising dollars and fewer dollars for America's prime athletic powers. In the meantime, the hunt for revenue for these expensive programs continues unabated.

In sum, the American university's accommodation to the new television market

forces is pronounced. More than many realize, the university is deeply enmeshed in a rapidly evolving sports market. Moreover, the competition among universities for access to this expanding sports market is growing. Whereas the university's external relations in other commercial areas may, perhaps, be congruent with the maintenance of academic values, the sports market dominates its relationship with the university. More specifically, the requirements of television structure the sports markets for universities. So, the university builds a new stadium because of its access to large-scale markets. Universities alter their sports schedules to respond to television presentations. In these and other ways, universities undertake actions that increase the ability of market forces to determine intercollegate athletic activities.

3. Boosters and Corporate Athleticism

Boosters have always been supporters of athletic production. They reinforce the university's growing relationship to television. As previously noted, the distinctive feature of successful college sports teams is that they all have strong booster groups. How, then, are booster activities qualitatively dif-

ferent across universities? As corporate athleticism grows, boosters are likely to increase in importance.

1. They generate competitive intensity.

2. Encourage gifts.

3. Provide strong support for intercollegiate sports.

While these functions are not exclusive to contemporary boosters, they constitute apparently indispensable conditions for penetration of television markets. What is it about boosters that makes them so indispensable to the new sports market system? How does the expansion of television markets influence their evolving role? More specifically, what actions of boosters help intercollegiate teams move from the amateur to the corporate athletic system?

Boosters contribute to the productivity of the sports system through their roles as managers of an underground economy that generates substantial money to provide surreptitious benefits like cars, people, money, organization, and other remunerations to athletes and coaches. Boosters provide an informal system of fringe benefits: local radio and television programs for coaches, assistance

with transportation costs, educational benefits for coaches' children, investments in stocks and real property, special banking and mortgage arrangements, and sundry other benefits.(Visser, 1983:39) In this way the boosters build a financial and economic infrastructure, providing the foundations for serious intercollegiate competition. Without a strong booster support system, universities are unable to compete in the new commercial sports system. As universities become more closely integrated into this system, they will also become more dependent on boosters. Hence, boosters should become more diligent in the emerging corporate athletic system because of their propensity to respond actively to to the evolving market impulses.

Equally important, boosters build <u>vertical</u> linkages to similar groups at junior colleges and at the high schools. They deepen the capacity of the University sports systems to incorporate other components from the secondary and higher educational system.

As the boosters become active in the secondary schools and in the community, parents become booster agents for their children: they provide the resources to

enhance the competitive elan of their children. Thus the culture of corporate athleticism penetrates deep into American society and culture at large, and boosters are the most pervasive agents of that penetration. They function as an informal mechanism for extending the scope of the new sports system. Through these and other mechanisms, games have assumed a new productive importance in shaping the broad competitive impulses in American society.

A highly decentralized sports system of massive scope is now evolving in the United States. It is a total sports system, characterized by top-to-bottom integration of the corporate television system and intermediary social structures. The sports television market induces all intermediary structures--universities, boosters, and highly competitive families--to serve market ends. This penetration capacity mobilizes individual talents on a massive scale around the norms of the sports market. All the intermediary institutions adjust in varying degrees to the market impulses of corporate athleticism. The distinctive essence of the new athleticism is that business values are now deeply embedded into a new production system with a greater capacity than traditional

business organizations to penetrate the larger society. This penetration has a corrosive effect. They do so by filtering out values--including the values of amateurism and fair play--that are incompatible with the business ethos of corporate athleticism.

The NCAA and Legitimation Crisis

In periods of flux and change, the NCAA has sought to restructure athletic participation through new regulatory procedures. Efforts to formulate new rules marked one of the ways in which the NCAA attempted to adapt to changes in the fundamental structure of sports. This response to change would be particularly important for the NCAA given that its organizational structure developed in the context of amateur athletics. In amateur athletics, the universities were the prime producers of intercollegiate sports. The biggest secret in the country is that the NCAA is a weak institution operating on cooperative norms to punish violations of amateur athletic rules by universities.(Nelson: 1983) In this era of corporate athleticism, however, the prime producer of intercollegiate sports is television not the university. By and large, the NCAA has not very

effectively established a balance of power between television networks and universities. The recent supreme court decision altering the already declining capacity of the NCAA has all but destroyed its regulatory role and constitutes one important systemic effect of the NCAA's inability to deal with an expanding field of television sports markets.

This reduction in the NCAA's ability to regulate intercollegiate sports appears likely to continue in the future. Universities with strong athletic sports traditions have gained a much sought after autonomy and possess the resources to best adapt to new expanding television markets. Naturally, the NCAA has resisted measures that would diminish its regulatory authority, but the beat goes on. Besides the challenges from universities most responsive to television markets, the NCAA has lost authority as a result of the increased pluralism in universities generally. To the extent that internal power in universities has become more fragmented, the NCAA has lost authority. The limits of presidential control over sports programs have engendered cross-cutting political pressures within the NCAA. For example, when the American

Council of Education sought to organize a reform coalition this presidential coalition was not supported in important instances by coaches and athletic directors.(Singletary, 2-5: 1984) Such political fragmentation makes it especially difficult for the NCAA to organize a wide-ranging policy consensus. Finally, the NCAA has found it most difficult to regulate the activities of boosters, who, of course, occupy no formal status in the new sports system.

In a sports system in which the emphasis on market values seems clearly destined to become stronger, the regulatory role of the NCAA remains uncertain. The amateur origins of college sports provide the rule-making foundations for the NCAA's role; and yet, the amateur values of college sports have experienced a profound decline for many decades. At the same time, the NCAA itself is not structured to function as a strong regulatory body. Recent events have shown once again that its authority is not sufficiently strong to contain the powerful market thrust of corporate athleticism. The organizational structure of college sports in its new corporate form is at the same time inside and outside the university. By its very nature, then, it is subject to a set of social and busi-

ness norms far more extensive that those amateur norms historically connected to college sports and higher education.

Television will continue to structure corporate athleticism. It is therefore the mechanism that will produce additional effects:

1. It will continue to create new necessities to which universities, players and teams will adapt.
2. Athletic directors will redouble their efforts to gain access to the administrative resources needed to strengthen the new athletic structure. In some instances, universities may even use their political clout to gain access to regional television markets.
3. In effect, the university's accommodation to corporate athleticism will deepen.

Beyond this analysis, ultimately, the rise of television marks the end of amateurism. Amateurism was neither linked to corporate values nor beholden to mass audiences. Thus, during the reign of amateurism the values of athleticism were firmly checked. Under the influence of television, however, corporate ath-

leticism increasingly operates as a relatively pure market system: it relentlessly recruits, trains, and selects students for careers in professional sports. It, moreover, reduces the university's ability to retain athletic values which possess no inherent exchange value in the market place i.e. those associated with non-commercial sports.

The rise of corporate athleticism brings about value displacement:

1. The individualism of the inner directed, disciplined amateur sportsman dissipates.
2. Athletes are now nutured on the values of corporate cooperative teamwork and competition for positional goods, e.g., media exposure and product expansion.
3. Ironically, and in contrast to amateurism, corporate athleticism presents the public with the stellar individual of exceptional talent, the superstar. Yet the superstar, as the L.A. Olympics often revealed does not always exemplify the triumph of inner values. (Hart-Nibbrig: 1984)

Reform Proposals

The recent spate of scandals about illegal payments to college athletes, together with the recognized role of the commercial market in college sports, established a context for evaluating different proposals to reform college sports. At the same time, however, political reality dictates that a clear recognition that college coaches are paid to win, underlining the fact that in a market system unusual productivity is rewarded. Losing coaches are fired, winning coaches get higher rewards. This context implies that the incentives for reform in contemporary college sports are contradictory. In this case, the incentives for political reforms are ultimately weak; or at best, unequally distributed through the corporate sports system. Nevertheless, we can assess sundry reform proposals in terms of the political and institutional constraints on the acceptable of such proposals and assess the extent to which the recommended proposals might sustain or alter basic features of the new sports system.

1. One reform proposal would recognize the present sports system as a semi-professional one. The model for the organization of semi-professional

sports is the baseball farm system. In this proposal, college sports would be recognized as entertainment. Athletes would not enter academic programs, since this would introduce a noncommercial goal into their professional training. Although universities might continue to organize sports activities, they would do so as an explicit public service. College students could participate in this system, but they would not be the sole basis for recruitment. A more efficient semi-professional sports system would recruit athletes solely on the basis of their prospective talent. Under the present system, athletes who do not possess minimum academic skills sometimes cannot gain access to the training needed to develop their skills. Coaches would be hired strictly on their win/lost records, without regard to their academic credentials. Indeed, coaches would be sports managers, not coaches in the traditional sense. All those actions needed to maximize consumer interests would be carried out. The long-term evolutionary trend in the semi-professional model would be to separate college sports from its remaining university and amateur foundations.

Colleges, in this model, would retain the so-called minor sports supple-

mented by intra-mural sports. This system involves an institutional separation they major commercial sports from the academic life of the university. It would thus continue the commercialization trend in its purest form. Thought public universities might benefit from this arrangement economically, given that they would operate a semi-professional team, the political costs in terms of a universities relations with legislatures, local businesses, alumni, publicity, and student constiuencies would be immense.

2. A second proposal would require stronger presidential leadership and institutional control at individual campuses. Presidential leadership would be used, as was recently the case at Yale University, to place the sports program solidly within the university's educational mission. The roles of students, coaches, scholarships, recruitment, and sports schedules would be examined in terms of their relationship to traditional academic values. Coaches would be expected to teach; students to learn; athletic scholarships would be treated like other student scholarships; and special efforts at athletic recruitment would be correspondingly de-emphasized. In addition, the sports program would operate

strictly according to academic schedules; and athletes would be treated primarily as typical students, eliciting no more special attention than other college students.

In this model, faculty leadership is also asserted. Faculty would serve attentively on faculty-administrative oversight committees to insure that academic standards are adhered to in the administration of the university's sports program. Students and alumni would be consulted on important athletic decisions; but would have no formal role in administrative decision-making. In this model, the alumni is called on for financial support of athletic programs; but is insolated from the management of resources and from the mobilization of resources. It has a support role but not a political mobilization role. This package represents essentially the restoration of the amateur model. It is most likely to prevail at universities with strong academic traditions, as at Yale, or at institutions with a political capacity to sustain a firm set of institutional controls.

The University of San Francisco is an example of the administrative control

model. Following repeated sanctions for NCAA violations and a personal scandal involving a prominent basketball player, th University of San Francisco dropped and then restructured its basketball program. Under the control of a Jesuit priest as Athletic Director, the University of San Francisco has hired a basketball coach committed to an amateur philosophy. The school's program is now geared towards playing in the West--a policy which takes it out of the national sports system. Players are recruited locally with full basketball scholarships. The mission of the San Francisco basketball is based on amateur goals. It seeks to stay clean and win--on the assumption as President Liovachio put it, that "if it has been done, it can be done."

Amateur norms, in short, can be restored. While alumni at the University of San Francisco raised funds for sports programs, they reportedly are no longer involved in basketball recruiting. In this case, NCAA violations and adverse publicity were incentives to induce a profound restructing of an athletic program. At both Yale and San Francisco, presidential leadership and institutional traditions formed important ingredients for the adoption of vigorous

policies to reassert the amateur model.

The conditions that facilitate the adoption of the amateur model are specific conditions. If the sources of corruption in college sports are systemic in nature, reform proposals must also be systemic in scope. In these circumstances, the amateur can be retained, perhaps, only at universities with entrenched institutional traditions. Such reforms, however, fail to deal with the systemic incentives for the maintenance of the existing system. Systemic reforms can only be effective if major public universities are committed to the indication of college sports corruption. If one university is able to sustain questionable practices, then the norms associated with corporate athleticism seem likely to continue. In this situation, the model of market reform in incremental change in which no major corporate sports interests system makes fundamental consession. Instead, each actor makes only minor concessions sufficient to return the status quo ante, rules modifications may alter behavior but leave the fundamental system intact. In the following section, we examine proposals that would (1) reduce corrupt practices in college sports; and (2) leave the present

system intact, thought the dominant hypothesis is that corruption remains an inherent part of corporate athleticism itself.

Maintenance

3. This option would reject the possible return to the amateur model covertly and reject the semi-professional model overtly. This reform model opts for a middle position, which amounts to accepting the present system as the dominant reality of the new sports system. Though the ritual symbols of amateurism are accepted, certain adjustments in the direction of the market are accepted. New scholarships would recognize some of the special needs of athletes from low-income backgrounds. Special stipends would be made available for athletes unable to work part-time because of legitimate university commitments.

Such a stipend would allow special payments to be made to athletes, to compensate them for the extensive athletic training they must endure. Rather than have such athletes accept no-show jobs, they are granted special need awards not generally available to non-athletic students. Such scholarships would then per-

mit the NCAA and universities to legitimately sanction students for accepting extra-legal payments. In the present rule structure, athletic programs are sanctioned, not athletes. In the new rule, structure, the implicit status of the athlete as a commodity is recognized. Individual athletes who accepted extralegal payments would be prohibited from playing a sport for a specific period of time. They would not therefore be granted an opportunity to develop their athletic skills in rigorous competition. They would not have access to public media and thus the opportunity to develop their market price for bargaining purposes. In this way, the present system makes adjustments to eliminate--or, better effectively control--the most corrupt features of the present system. One weakness of any proposal that sustains the present system lies in the enforcement of existing regulations. In the present highly competitive system, some coaches and players will always perceive perverse incentives to violate existing rules. But, as we all certainly know, that's the way a market operates--it rewards both corrupt and honest producers as long as they produce.